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## Part 1

[Convention Slide]

[Slide] “Go up on a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’” (Isaiah 40:9 ESV) 1. Zion/Jerusalem; 2. Good News; 3. The Cities of Judah; and 4. Behold Your God

### **Zion/Jerusalem**

[Slide] Susanna Petroysan heard her daughter cry out, “*Mommy, I’m thirsty. I want a drink.*” She and four-year-old Gayaney were stuck in a basement beneath tons of collapsed concrete and steel. Several dead bodies were crushed along side of them. It was December 7, 1988 and an earthquake in Armenia, a former Soviet republic, had just killed 55,000 people. “*Mommy, I’m so thirsty. I want a drink.*”

There was nothing for Susanna to give. She was trapped flat on her back. At some point, during what seemed to be an eternal night, Susanna remembered watching a TV show about an explorer in the Arctic who was dying of thirst. His comrade slashed his hand open and gave his friend his blood.

So, after feeling around in the darkness of their basement, Susanna found some shattered glass. She used it to slash her left hand and then gave it to Gayaney to suck her blood. Days passed. Susanna had no idea how many times she cut her hands. She only

knew that if she stopped her daughter would die. Hands were cut, blood was shed and the child was saved.

[Slide] On August of 587 BC Israel's world caved in. The temple collapsed, the monarchy lay in ruins, the land became a wasteland and all hope was dismantled and destroyed. Then a massive aftershock brought further wreckage and ruin. Seven hundred miles from home, Judah's exiles became trapped in a basement called Babylon.

In 587 BC Babylon unleashed against Jerusalem their policies of urbicide (the destruction of a city's architecture) and ecocide (the wiping out of an environment). When Nebuchadnezzar defeated Judah, it looked as though it was the triumph of his gods Marduk and Nebo (cf. 46:1). Everything looked as though Yahweh was no match for these foreign deities. Or perhaps the situation was even worse. What if Yahweh did not even exist? What if Israel's trust in him had been in vain? Or, conversely, maybe Yahweh was real and did have the power to defeat Babylon, but he chose not to do it.

[Slides] The Preacher's perspective in Ecclesiastes might be their best text. "Again I looked and saw all the oppression that was taking place under the sun: I saw the tears of the oppressed and they have no comforter; power was on the side of their oppressors and they have no comforter." (Eccl 4:1). Judah's nightmare repeated itself like a broken record. "There is no comforter for her [Zion]" (Lam 1:2). "There was no comforter for her" (Lam 1:9). "For far from me is a comforter" (Lam 1:16). "There was no comforter for her" (Lam 1:17). "There was no comforter for me" (Lam 1:21). How much darker can the dirge become?

[Slide] But Yahweh was not finished with his people! Into the speechless silence, God speaks! He does an about-face! Into the pain he commands his heavenly messengers,

“Comfort, comfort my people, says your God!” It is time for Israel to step out darkness and into Yahweh’s marvelous light!

[Slide] It may strike us as strange that Zion/Jerusalem is ordered to become Yahweh’s means of announcing the good news. Lamentations 1 describes the city as a widow and slave, abandoned by friends, with no resting place, suffering bitterly, bereft of her children, mocked by her enemies, unclean, despised, rejected, weeping, without a comforter, deceived, groaning, and fainting. How can a city portrayed like this proclaim good news to the defeated cities of Judah? How can someone who laments, “Yahweh abandoned me and the Lord forgot me” (49:14), be any good at announcing the gospel?

*Chapter 40 is an overview of the entire unit and as such displays Zion’s destination.*

[Slide] Is 40:9 then states the *goal* of chapters 41–54, rather than the city’s current state. Yahweh’s choice of a wounded Zion as his witness to the gospel is in keeping with his election of the patriarchs who were “perishing Arameans” (Deut 26:5), the matriarchs who were barren at one point (Gen 11:30; 25:21; 29:31), Israel who “was the least of all the people” (Deut 7:7), and climactically Jesus who was rejected and crucified as a common criminal (1 Cor 1:22–23).

So Zion, though lying in ruins and lamenting Yahweh’s absence, will be restored. Then she will be able to get up to a high mountain and announce the good news. As such, Yahweh tells Zion not what she is, but what she will become. A similar strategy is used in Gen 17:5 when he renames Abram (“exalted father”) to Abraham (“father of many”) and in Gen 32:28 when he calls Jacob (“liar, trickster”) Israel (“let God rule”). Simon he calls Peter.

[Slide] Zion's final destiny is made manifest in 2:2–4 where the prophet foresees the day when she will be lifted up as the highest of all the mountains. [Accent many and all].

[Slide] **Good News** The word “gospel” first appears in a theological sense in Isaiah 40:9 and becomes the fountainhead for the New Testament announcement of good news in Christ Jesus.

[Slides] Jerome (c. 342–420) wrote of Isaiah, “He should be called an evangelist rather than a prophet because he describes all the mysteries of Christ and the Church so clearly that you would think he is composing a history of what has already happened rather than prophesying about what is to come.” When the church father Augustine (345–430) asked another church father Ambrose (c. 337 – 397) for his advice on what he should read, the latter suggested Isaiah, “Because I believe he is more plainly a foreteller of the Gospel and of the calling of the Gentiles than are the others.” The church father John Chrysostom (c. 347–407) called Isaiah, “the prophet with the loudest voice.”

The saving message in Isaiah 40-55, its soaring language and unforgettable imagery are tightly woven not only into the fabric of the New Testament, but Christian hymnody, liturgy, and devotional literature. Christological interpretations of these chapters reach their artistic zenith in George Fredrick Handel's *Messiah*, in which fourteen movements come from chapters 40–55.

Matthew sums up the preaching and ministry of Jesus with the formula “the gospel of the kingdom” (4:23; 9:35; 24:14). Jesus understands his mission in light of 40:9

and 52:7. In Mk 1:1 the evangelist employs the noun Gospel to begin his gospel. In Jesus' ministry God's end time gospel reign is now active (see Mk 1:15). Luke/Acts mission and Romans and justification.

[Slide] Free Pizza – Where? When? Who is it for?

[Slide] Is it delivered or do I have to go get it? Is 53:10, “My righteous servant will justify many.” MANY – Is 54:17, “Their righteousness comes from me.”

“So shall he sprinkle many nations.”

[Slide of Jesus] Gospel delivered.

[Slide] **The Cities of Judah**

This much is also certain. Whatever the exact number was, the Babylonian exile left Jerusalem like a ghost town, with few people living in and around its precincts (e.g., 2 Kings 25; Jeremiah 40–43). After 587 BC, Israelite families were scattered, villagers lived in cities, the royal class had no palace, and priests had no altar. Everything had been turned upside down and inside out. Despondent and despairing, those in Babylon lost hope.

Between the Iron Age (1,200 BC – 550 BC) and the Persian period (520 BC – 333 BC) Jerusalem and her neighboring villages declined in population by 90 percent, while the land of Judah fell by 70 percent. “This would mean that the region closest to Jerusalem suffered a mortal blow at the end of the Iron Age, causing the evacuation of most of its population.” “This region was not settled again until the Persian period, and even then recovered only partially and in limited fashion, another indication of the extent of the damage.” During the Persian era Jerusalem's population was about 3,000, or “12% of the population of the city and its environs on the eve of the destruction.”

The cities of Judah are the target of the gospel. They are broken and hurting! But God wants the nations to hear and believe the gospel!

Generally speaking, most Christians mistakenly believe that God's concern for the nations and the Great Commission begins in places like Matthew 28:18–20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:44–49, and John 20:21. But Yahweh's concern for the nations doesn't begin in the New Testament, nor does it even start in Isaiah.

[Slides] The first issue of the Great Commission is recorded in Gen. 12:1–3 – *“Yahweh said to Abram, ‘Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you, be a blessing! I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all families on earth will be blessed through you.’”*

Abram (later named Abraham), Isaac, Jacob (later named Israel) and their offspring were called to become a leaven among the nations, a wellspring of living water, and a constant invitation for the Gentiles to learn of the saving deeds of Yahweh. The nation is Yahweh's missionary to the world.

Isaiah 40:3, *“And the glory of Yahweh will be revealed, and all flesh together will see it.”* Isaiah 42:1, *“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.”* Isaiah 45:22, *“Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.”*

[Slides] Isaiah 49:6, ***“I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”*** Isaiah 52:10, ***“All the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.”*** Isaiah 55:1, again, ***“Come, all who are thirsty ...”***

Isaiah calls the exiles to testify to the world that Yahweh longs for all to be saved come to the knowledge of the truth. For example, in Isaiah 43:10 Yahweh states, ***“You are my witnesses”*** and in 44:8 are the words, ***“Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? You are my witnesses!”***

Isaiah 42:3, ***“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.”*** There are billions of bruised reeds and smoldering wicks in the world.

[Slide] You see, we, in the west, watch recessions come and recessions go, but for the two-thirds world, recessions don't come and go. They just come. They never go, they just come and come. Every seven seconds a child under the age of five dies of hunger and 4,500 people in Africa today will die of AIDS. One in seven children in our world (158 million) went to work today, and they will do so every day, just to survive. Forty percent of the world lacks basic sanitation and 1.6 billion people have no electricity. Nearly one billion people in the world cannot read or write or sign their name.

Almost one billion people in the world live on less than one American dollar per day. Another 2.5 billion people in the world live on less than two American dollars per day. And so more than half of the world lives on less than two dollars a day. Tonight 840 million people will go to bed hungry, some even starving, because they cannot afford a single meal. This year one million people in the world will commit suicide.

[Slide] These broken, hurting masses, in every country and every city and every village, need what Isaiah 40-55 offers and what we have, the mercy of *Jesus*.

But there is another kind of suffering in the world and it is the worst kind of suffering of all. It is the suffering of hopelessness, the suffering of guilt and sin, the suffering of brokenness and shame. And it all leads to eternal suffering. Oh, how the Lord longs for us to awaken for those who need the message of salvation by grace, through faith in the only God, the crucified God, Jesus who died and rose again!

Please understand. When you and I get a glimpse of this physical and spiritual suffering, whether through study or travel or some of the statistics I just shared, it can quickly lead to guilt. Guilt isn't helpful. Guilt doesn't change lives. Guilt doesn't drive the mission. Honesty is helpful. Awareness is helpful. Knowledge is helpful. Guilt isn't.

We won't make a difference with the attitude, "*Well, I guess someone's got to do it.*" We won't bring the best of our mercy ministry or the best of our gospel message if we are muttering under our breath, "*Well ... okay.*" No. We will change the world, one life at a time when we see our God.

[Slide] **Behold Your God** The word "behold" denotes immediacy and commands attention to an event that is newsworthy or unexpected. Take note! This is the main point! Look here! Exodus 6:7; Isaiah 40:1–2. Why behold your God?

[Slide] The Babylonian empire began in 626 BC under the leadership of Nabopolassar. It ended in 539 BC with the demise of its last king, Nabonidus and his son Belshazzar. The name Babylon, *Bab-ilu*, means "gate of the gods." The empire claimed to be the nerve center of the universe, the very gate to heaven!

[Slide] As Judean exiles entered Babylon through the Ishtar Gate and walked onto the great Processional Way they stepped on imported limestone slabs that were inscribed with the phrase, "To the honor of Marduk." Marduk, it was claimed in Babylonian texts,

was the creator of the universe and king of the world. The empire's propaganda included these lines from the *Enuma Elis*:

You, Marduk, are the most honored of the great gods,

Your decree is unrivaled, your word is unrivaled.

From this day unchangeable shall be your pronouncement.

To raise or bring low these shall be in your hand.

Your utterance shall be true,

Your command shall be unimpeachable.

The empire had a well organized plan to conform the exiles to their new reality.

[Slide] Just ask Hannaniah, Mishael and Azariah. Or maybe you know them by their *Veggie Tale* names Shach, Rach, and Benny. Some affectionately call them "Your Shack, My Shack and a Bungalow." But in Daniel 1:7 the empire changes their names to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. In the ancient Near East the changing of names signified a change of destiny. Parallels are in Pharaoh's renaming Joseph (Gen 41:45) and Nebuchadnezzar's new name for Judah's last king (2 Kgs 24:17). This renaming by the Babylonians was an attempt to impose the ideology and polytheistic worldview of Babylon on these young men. The events in Daniel 3 with Nebuchadnezzar's statue and the fiery furnace indicate that Shach, Rach and Benny refused to blend in bow down or sell out.

Slowly but surely most of the exiles began to accommodate themselves to their new surroundings. They were unmoved by Isaiah's poetic claims, alarming narrative, and stunning doxologies. In fact, economic documents unearthed in Tel el Murassu on the Tigris River show that blending in with Babylon brought with it stunning financial

success. Living comfortably in a place of destruction and death became the new way of life.

[Slide] It was the whole boiling frog syndrome. You know, it is said that if a frog is placed in hot water, it will jump out, but if it is placed in lukewarm water that is gradually heated, it will never get out, but slowly die.

Isaiah 40–55 indicates that many of exiles began calling their Babylonian basement the new normal. They were in hot water! If they don't get out soon, they will die! That's why throughout Isaiah 48 the prophet calls them, and I quote, "***stubborn ... unyielding ... headstrong ... prone to idolatry ... deaf ... deceptive ... and a stubborn rebel from birth.***" All this because Israel refused to listen; *shema* – the Hebrew verb meaning "to listen" is the governing verb of the chapter. It appears eleven times in Isaiah 48.

Can't you just imagine the people responding to the prophet? "*Isaiah, haven't you heard? Babylon is **the** political-military-religious superpower of the day. This is the land of life, liberty and the purchase of happiness! Why should we go back to little back-water Judah? Besides, what a huge hassle it would be to liquidate our assets, pack our bags, and pull up stakes just to live in a land devastated by famine and warfare. Get out of Babylon? Isaiah, have you lost your mind? Get lost!*"

This is like a thirsty person choosing to drink raw sewage instead of water from a mountain stream. It's like a bankrupt company rejecting a generous government bailout.

The captives wouldn't leave their captivity! The lights of Babylon, the sounds of Babylon, and the religion of Babylon coaxed most of them into staying in *Babylon!*

Isaiah 30:10–11 is the classic rejection to the prophetic call. ***“Speak to us smooth things, prophecy illusions; stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!”***

What compromised the gospel? What compromised the mission? In a word, idolatry. Idolatry among the exiles, their fascination with Babylonian deities, undercut their witness to the world. To prove his point Isaiah takes us on a tour of an idol factory.

[Slide] To get some perspective I need to take you to a *Build a Bear Workshop*, so please bear with me (pun intended). Back in 1997 Maxine Clark opened the first *Build a Bear* at the Galleria Shopping Center. Today there are over 300 workshops worldwide.

If you have never been to *Build a Bear* with five squirming and squealing seven-year-old girls, all who are on a sugar high from birthday cake and Mountain Dew, let me tell you the rules. First, you choose from over thirty models of bears. Next, you take your bear and stuff it, stitch it, fluff it, dress it, accessorize it, and name it. And the result? Your “berry own bear” has been born! To prove it you are given a customized birth certificate.

So, what you’ve conceived in your mind, you have built with your hands. You have chosen what it looks like and you have personalized it with your preferences. It’s just what you’ve always want in a bear. This is your creation! Ta da!

Building a bear is a lot like building your own god. That’s the point. Isaiah escorts us into a bona-fide Babylonian build-a-god workshop. [Slide] His description in 44:13–17 is as follows, ***“The carpenter measures with a line and makes an outline with a marker; he roughs it out with chisels and marks it with compasses. He shapes it in the form of man, of man in all his glory, that it may dwell in a shrine. He cut down cedars, or perhaps took a cypress or oak. He let it grow among the trees of the forest, or***

*planted a pine, and the rain made it grow ... He fashions a god and worships it; He prays to it and says, 'Save me; you are my god.'*"

Just as Israel liked to build gods, there is a part in all of us that delights in, let us say, "creative craftsmanship." We don't build bears; we build gods. We conceive it in our mind. We build it with our hands. We chose what it looks like. We personalize it with our preferences. It's just what we want in a god. It's a god who likes what I like, hates what I hate, who shares my opinion and who votes the same way I do. It is a god who increases my standard of living and happiness. This is a god who gives me what I want and stays out of my way the rest of the time.

John Calvin famously states that the human heart is a perpetual idol factory. Commenting on the First Commandment, Luther states in his Large Catechism, "*That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your God.*"

So, what are some of the idols we're building?

Yahweh says in Isaiah 42:18–20, "**Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see! ... You have seen many things, but have paid no attention; your ears are open, but you hear nothing.**" The exiles couldn't hear and they couldn't see so, naturally, they couldn't talk! Isaiah 42:17, states that the exiles were trusting in idols and saying to images, "**You are our gods.**"

"*Just who are these gods?*" I'm so glad you asked! Stay tuned. We'll take that up on part two!

## Part 2

[Two slides, review]

In Isaiah 46:1 the prophet calls these Babylonian gods “Bel” and “Nebo.” Bel is the title of the god Marduk. He was allegedly the “King of the Universe.” Nebo is mentioned only here in the Old Testament, yet there are several people called Nebo in the Old Testament; for example, Nebuzaradan, Nebuchadnezzar, Nabonidus, and Nabopolassar. Nebo was the son of Marduk and as the god of writing and wisdom he was the keeper of the Tablets of Destiny, who offered knowledge and understanding. By means of three words Isaiah is going to help us understand the empty promises of Marduk and Nebo.

[Slide] First, in 46:1 Isaiah calls them *atsabim*, translated by the ESV with “idols,” yet the word also means “pain.” For example, *atsabon* appears in Gen 3:16 to describe Eve’s pain at childbirth and again in Gen 3:17 to denote Adam’s pain at working the ground, now full of thorns and thistles. Get it? Idols only bring misery, heartache, and pain which is exactly what our first parents experienced after their fall into sin.

Second, in Isaiah 41:29 the prophet calls these gods *ephes* which means “nothing.” The prophet is saying that those who follow idols believe nothing of substance, care for nothing that matters, seek to know nothing of importance, find purpose in nothing that lasts, live for nothing that endures, and remain alive because when it comes to something to die for there is absolutely nothing.

Third, in Isaiah 44:9 the prophet continues by calling idols *tohu*. The Hebrew word *tohu* first appears in Gen 1:2 to describe the world apart from Yahweh’s speaking creation into existence. What’s the point? Idols are embodiments of disorder and despair; they are formless and void. People addicted to them get lost in a sea of chaos for they only impart a life of darkness where God cannot be seen or heard.

*Astabim* – pain, *ephes* – nothing, and *tohu* – chaos. No wonder David writes in Psalm 16, “***The sorrows of those who run after other gods will multiply.***”

[Slide] But because we spend so much time in our build-a-god workshop Isaiah takes us to court, literally. Let’s listen in as Isaiah 41:21–24 describes Yahweh grilling the gods we think will bring happiness and peace and joy and life. The interrogation goes something like this. Yahweh, “*Tell me gods, what happened.*” Silence. Yahweh, “*Tell me gods, what is going to happen.*” Silence. Yahweh, “*Tell me gods, what will happen hereafter.*” Silence. Yahweh, “*Gods, do good.*” Silence. Yahweh, “*Gods, do harm.*” Silence. Yahweh, “*Gods, frighten me.*” Silence. Yahweh’s verdict? “*You are nothing gods, your work is nothing, and your worshipers are nothing!*” Yahweh is the real God, the idols are nothing! Go Yahweh!

Because Isaiah, our trusty tour guide, informs us in 40:8 that “***The Word of our God stands forever,***” this is a living and active word, not only to exiles in Babylon. It is also a word of God to us, against us, and finally and forever, for us. What do I mean?

[Slide] We know what it is like to be buried in Babylon. Oh God, do we know! Our bondage began with just one more drink, one more lie, one more fling, one more glance, one more porn cite, one more piece of juicy church gossip. But one more always longs for one more, and then just one more. And then a massive earthquake hits and in its aftershocks we find ourselves trapped in a basement of death called Babylon. What next? The boiling frog syndrome unleashes its hypnotic power!

Sure, being obsessed with pornography, money, ecclesiastical rumor- mongering, food, people’s approval, or work is a strange place to be in, at first. It’s crushing to be trapped beneath tons of collapsed hopes and shattered dreams.

But in time we become accustomed to living in destruction and death. With each passing day it becomes easier to deny that I am stuck on stuff that kills and steals and destroys. We are in hot water!

[Slide] And so Isaiah takes the exiles, and now us, to Egypt. Why Egypt? It was in Egypt that Yahweh first delivered his people from slavery. And if Yahweh did it once, Isaiah maintains, he can do it again.

[Slide] Isaiah 43:16–19, ***“This is what Yahweh says – he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick: Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!”*** And this new thing is a new deliverance, a new salvation, a new exodus, but this time from the basement called Babylon!

[Slides] Yahweh longs to awaken Israel out of spiritual slumber so the people get out of Babylon. He announces, Isaiah 52:7, ***“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God is king!”*** Get it? Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is *the* King, not some fraud named Marduk! Rest assured, says Isaiah in 40:31, that ***“those who wait on Yahweh will renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not be weary, they will walk and not grow faint.”*** Get it? Yahweh says in Exodus 19:4 that he brought Israel out of Egypt on eagle’s wings. Now exiles will again take flight on wings like eagles and leave their life of compromise and conformity. And they will run and run and run as far away from Babylon as possible. Then Isaiah 43:4 the prophet quotes Yahweh as saying, ***“You are***

*precious and honored in my sight and I love you.*” Get it? It’s not too late! No matter how sick and sorry we are, Yahweh still loves us! And in Isaiah 51:17 and again in 52:1 he cries out, **“Wake, awake!”**

[Slide] The climax of this preaching comes in Isaiah 48:20, **“Get out of Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare it with a shout of joy.”**

It’s in Yahweh’s heart to call people out of darkness and into his marvelous light. He called Abram and Sarai to get out of Haran because it was the center of moon worship. He urged Lot and his family to get out of Sodom and Gomorrah because it was the center of sexual perversion. And he called Israel to get out of Egypt because it was the epicenter of a socialization that brought about massive dehumanization. You see, at the core of Israel’s narrative is Yahweh’s ongoing call for his people to get out of decay, decadence and death.

[Slide] Sisters and brothers, become what we worship, either for ruin or for restoration. Jeremiah 2:5 and 2 Kings 17:15 both say that if we worship idols we will become like them. Listen to Psalm 115:4–8, **“Their idols are silver and gold, made by the hands of men. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats. Those who make them will be like them.”** So do you see why in Isaiah 42:18–20 the prophet calls the exiles blind and deaf? They had become senseless, just like the gods they were worshiping.

Paying homage to anyone or anything other than the Triune God dehumanizes, and takes away the ability to see, hear, smell, feel, walk, and talk. People become

apersonal, impersonal, anti-personal, pre-personal and have no way to relate with themselves, others, or the world.

Idolatry leads to the breakdown of every human relationship because once the relationship between the Creator and creature is ruptured we are unable to have any life-giving relationship with any other part of creation. [Slide] This is Paul's argument in Romans 1:18–31. These verses state, in part, ***“They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless.”*** Idolatry kills me; it kills the people in my life; it kills the church; it kills the mission.

Why do idols have such power?

Paul asserts in 1 Corinthians 10:20 that the worship of idols is worship ***“offered to demons.”*** Idols have such great power to imprison people and rape them of their God-given humanity because Satan is the spiritual reality behind every addiction, compulsion, and obsession.

A church that is afraid to confront idolatry is an accommodated, culture-bound, tamed, safe church. It is a church heavy on nostalgia but light in touching any of life's deepest issues. A church that conforms herself to the world of idols evaporates into an ocean of irrelevancy and anti-neighborly individualism. Stability and equilibrium become the watch-words. Come weal come woe, the status remains quo. The goals of such a church become the kingdom of comfort and the priority of preservation.

[Slide] There is another God. Behold your God! Isaiah 40:9–10 are the main motif in chapters 40–55. ***“Behold your God! See, Lord Yahweh comes with power, and his arm ruling for him. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arm and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.”***

It’s all in the arm. In 40:10 Yahweh has an arm of power; in 40:11 Yahweh demonstrates an arm of compassion. All power and no compassion, that’s not our God. All compassion and no power, that’s not our God. Yahweh is merciful and mighty; tender and tough; he is both saving and sovereign! Isaiah 52:10 revels in the arm of power, ***“Yahweh will lay bare his holy arm.”*** He rolls up his sleeves, shows us his arm, and we see bulging biceps. But his power is made perfect in weakness.

[Rembrandt slide] In Rembrandt’s painting of the prodigal son in 1668. The two hands are quite different. The left hand upon the son’s shoulder is strong and muscular. The fingers are spread out and cover a large part of the son’s shoulder and back. That hand not only touches, but, with its strength, that hand also holds.

[Rembrandt slide] How different is the father’s right hand! This hand doesn’t hold or grasp. It is refined, soft, and tender. The fingers are close to each other and they have an elegant quality about them. The right hand lies gently upon the son’s shoulder. It wants to caress, offering consolation and comfort.

The right hand is that of a woman. How do we know? Rembrandt left us a clue. The exact same hand appears in one of his earlier paintings where it is the right hand of a Jewish woman; delicate, gentle and tender. The hand of the man is whose hand? It is

Rembrandt's hand. It speaks of who he is as a father who supported and defended and loved his four children.

[Slides] Isaiah 53:1 reveals the arm of compassion, ***“To whom has Yahweh arm been revealed?”*** This compassionate arm was revealed when it was stripped of its clothing, tied to a Roman whipping post, and hung bleeding upon an instrument of death.

The synthesis of Soldier and Shepherd occurs in other texts (e.g., 2 Sam 5:2; 7:7 [referring to David]; Micah 5:4 [referring to the Messiah]). “Yhwh combines toughness and gentleness. There is a special authenticity about the gentleness of a tough person, and about the toughness of a gentle person.” His power is made manifest when he rescues the weak.

More verses from the Isaiah 53, ***“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and Yahweh has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”***

After writing these words, no wonder Isaiah says that idols are nothing and chaos and only compound our pain, because a cross-less god is no god at all. A god who doesn't suffer, a god who knows no agony, a god who doesn't die; this is a god without grace and a god who cannot deliver. That's why Isaiah pleads with us, ***“Behold, your God!”*** Yahweh comes with a strong arm to rule; he comes with a bleeding arm to love. It is time to turn in our tools, stop building substitutes, throw away the idols, and to never, ever again do business at a build-a-god workshop.

And when we do this our witness to the world becomes real, alive, genuine, powerful, and earth-shaking!

### Conclusions

[Slide] Stuck in the basement of our crumbled hopes and fragmented faith, we're so thirsty, so very, very thirsty, not for more of the same. We know its salt water in the desert. It doesn't quench it kills. We're thirsty for a clean conscience, a fresh start, for a loving, tender hand to reach into our basement and get us out.

[Slides] In Isaiah 40–55 Yahweh promises to quench that thirst, over and over again. Isaiah 41:17, ***“The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I Yahweh will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.”*** Isaiah 43:20, ***“I will provide water in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people.”*** Isaiah 44:3, ***“For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground.”*** Isaiah 55:1, ***“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”***

[Slide] These great and precious promises are found, fulfilled and come to fruition in Isaiah's Servant who says in 50:4–6, ***“Lord Yahweh has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary. He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. Lord Yahweh has opened my ears, and I have not been rebellious; I have not drawn back. I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.”*** And then the prophet takes us to the holy ground of Isaiah 53, ***“He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty***

*or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.”*

[Slide] And suddenly we find ourselves at Golgotha, an Aramaic term meaning, “The Place of the Skull.” For it is there that we see this Servant, up close and personal. And this Servant alone has the authority and compassion and love to reach into our wreckage, get us out, and quench our thirst. Isaiah 52:14–15, **“Just as there were many who were appalled at him, his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man and his form marred beyond human likeness, so will he sprinkle many nations.”** And with what does he sprinkle the nations? Blood. Because finally blood was all he had.

Look again. Here is a naked Man hanging on an execution stake, buried not in Babylon, but buried under the load of our addictions, compulsions, and obsessions. And we know by now, that when you’re buried, you get thirsty, so very, very thirsty. *Dipso*, the Servant cries out in the Greek of John 19:28. You and I have come to know it by means of two words, “I thirst.” We can only imagine.

His lips are cracked and he has a mouth of cotton, his throat, so dry he can’t swallow, and his voice, so hoarse he can scarcely speak. To find the last time moisture touched these lips we need to rewind the clock a dozen hours to the meal in the Upper Room. Since tasting the cup of the new covenant, Jesus has been spit upon, whipped and mocked, and rejected. He has been a cross carrier and sin-bearer, no liquid has quenched his thirst.

His disciples had deserted him. His garments had been gambled away. Even his Father had turned his back. Blood was all he had, but the blood of Jesus is all we need.

*“What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus! What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus!”*

Hands were cut, blood was shed, and we, the children, are saved.

[Slides] What next? Sisters and brothers, we are no longer in Babylon. We are on our way home! That’s why Isaiah invites us to start singing. Isaiah 42:10, ***“Sing to Yahweh a new song, his praise from the ends of the earth.”*** Isaiah 44:23, ***“Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for Yahweh has redeemed Jacob, he displays his glory in Israel.”*** Isaiah 49:13, ***“Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains! For Yahweh comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones.”***

And we are certain that this celebration, begun now, will continue in our forever home, the New Jerusalem. [Slide] All because of the promise in Isaiah 55:10–11, ***“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”***

An all-powerful word from an all-powerful and all-compassionate God with an all-powerful Gospel means our journey with Isaiah isn’t ending. No way! The journey has just begun!

[Slide] One more time, Isaiah 40:9, ***“Go up on a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, ‘Behold your God!’”***

[Slide] In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.